9 Distance
A Problem in Global History

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The Problem of Distance

The problem of distance occupies a central yet obscure place among global historians. For a field that seeks to explore social connections and cross-cultural exchanges, uneven and unfair as they might be, the space that separates actors from each other (our placeholder definition of 'distance') is intrinsic to the art. Most often, it is treated as an independent variable exogenous to human action, a physical or cultural geography that has to be overcome by encounters and contacts powered by technologies and social pressures. Global historians may disagree on how far we have overcome divides. But, just as global history came of age under the umbrella of the globalisation that gave it such significance, there has been an underlying presumption – to be unpacked herein – that the demise of distance was a secular, unavoidable propensity, culminating in a sense of spatial proximity (thanks to the workings of social media) and tight economic coupling (thanks to elaborate economic supply chains). The sense of being emancipated from distance also has its darker side, thanks to the same forces, as our screens fill with images of refugees fleeing Kyiv or megaships jamming the Suez Canal.

Still, there is remarkably little reflection on how distance functions in global history, in part because it is implicitly treated as a given, an exogenous condition of human life which human curiosity, ingenuity or greed strive to surmount. The result is confusion – indeed, so much confusion that global historians often find themselves invoking two seemingly incompatible narratives at once. One narrative focuses on the arc of global history as the demise or eclipse of distance. Drawn to stories of technological change, it emphasises communications and transportation breakthroughs that shrink the time needed to travel or convey messages. According to this narrative, the space separating humans has been shrinking for centuries; distance has been in decline since 1492 (a conventional marker for global history), a process that intensified with the advent of

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steam-based transportation and accelerated once more after 1945 under the flag of *Pax Americana*.[1]

A second grand narrative arrives at a very different conclusion. Instead of stories about closing gaps, some global historians find themselves accenting the persistence of distance, and even its heightening. The compass, steam and satellites may have shrunk the world, but they did not dissolve the gulfs that separate humans. They did not yield the one-world idylls that have often accompanied technological euphorias, from railway manias to Silicon Valley's (now faded) magical thinking. Indeed, the same instruments could be used to dehumanise in atrocious ways. Greater proximity, in effect, is not a sufficient condition for togetherness; it can often induce brutality. What is more, distance can be made intimate. Even as spanning and connecting technologies produce more togetherness, social and cultural interactions can yield chasms.[2]

In considering the problem of distance, this chapter argues, global historians need to be more mindful of the tricks that distance can play. If global historians often proclaim their ability to produce narratives that stand above methodological nationalism and other parochialisms, to break the ramparts of bounded collective myths, at times even touting the epistemic virtues of thinking 'big', 'broadening horizons' and aligning new perspectives with global needs, this chapter urges not just more humility but more awareness of the complex and often fraught ways in which more interdependence can also produce more conflict, more chasms.[3] Distance is not just an independent variable outside human interaction but has also been its effect. To understand this, we need to treat distance as more than just a physical determinant but as a social process.

Ghost Ship

On 7 March 2020, the Bahamian-flagged cruise ship *Zaandam* set sail from Buenos Aires with 1,241 passengers and 586 crew for an extended luxurious trip 'from the end of the world'. By the time it reached Florida three weeks

[1] Examples include Steven G. Marks, *The Information Nexus: Global Capitalism from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016) and Harry Blutstein, *The Ascent of Globalisation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). Both books exemplify a style that was more prominent before the great upheavals and reactions from 2015.

[2] For a classic statement, see Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1954). For a recent revision, Deborah Prentice and Dale Miller (eds.), *Cultural Divides: Understanding and Overcoming Group Conflict* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

[3] David Armitage, 'Horizons of History: Space, Time and the Future of the Past', *History Australia* 12,1 (2015), 207–25. The call for long-term, distance-collapsing narratives can also be seen in David Armitage and Jo Guldi's deliberately provocative *The History Manifesto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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later, 193 on board had flu-like symptoms; 4 people had already died. Port after port rebuffed the vessel as its tiny infirmary filled up. The governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, one of President Donald Trump's avid cheerleaders, declared that the vessel would not be permitted to dock. With about 250 Americans aboard, DeSantis's decision to turn citizens into pariahs provoked outrage. Even Donald Trump had an outburst: he didn't want the *Zaandam* to become a 'ghost ship'. DeSantis relented, allowing only the 49 Florida residents to disembark. The rest, Canadians, Europeans and others – including non-Floridian Americans – were lumped into the unwanted. For twelve days, the *Zaandam* floated offshore. Four more people died; hundreds more became infected. The president of the Holland America Line, Orlando Ashford, invoked principles of a fading era: 'The international community, consistently generous and helpful in the face of human suffering, shut itself off to *Zaandam* leaving her to fend for herself.'[4] Eventually, a deal was struck: the passengers could disembark. Given face masks, they were whisked out of Florida. Hundreds melted, untested, into the airports of Miami, Ft Lauderdale and Tampa Bay to board flights to New York, Toronto and London to infect people there and beyond.[5]

The tale of the ghost ship illustrates some of the challenges of grappling with distance in global history. Vacationers had come from all parts to gaze at a shrinking planet and its disappearing icebergs, only to be swept unawares into a pandemic that had started a few weeks earlier in Wuhan. Then, they discovered that this overheating global village was riven by fault lines and lethal differences between the rhetoric of the 'international community' and the legal walls of national ones. The ghost ship revealed how globe-trotting passengers got internally differentiated by gubernatorial edict, and how movement across any border doubles as an action that collapses distances while signifying differences.

Nor was the fate of the *Zaandam* peculiar to ways in which states doubled down on differentiators to sort people into those who deserved care and those who did not – and, lately, those who get vaccines from those who cannot. Citizens were made pariahs, persecuted and expelled, in their millions in the lead up to the outbreak of Covid-19. Even before the pandemic, strangers were persecuted across the world as nativists sought to 'unmix' nations that the

[4] For testimonies of the horror, 'Trump Urges Florida to Welcome Cruise Ship with Deadly Coronavirus Outbreak', Reuters News, 31 March, 2020, www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-cruise-zaandam/cruise-ship-with-coronavirus-outbreak-sails-to-uncertain-florida-welcome-idUKL1N2BO26F.

[5] Chris Buckley et al., '25 Days That Changed the World: How Covid-19 Slipped China's Grasp', *The New York Times*, 30 December 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/12/30/world/asia/china-coronavirus.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage; Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

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world had mixed up. Their paroxysms were triggered by globalisation's blurry borders, merging markets and mixing peoples, thereby provoking what Arjun Appadurai prophetically called the 'anxiety of incompleteness'. By this, he means an affective condition of a nation's sense of beleaguered majorityhood. One can add the campaign and attempted putsch in the United States to assert minority white rule in the name of a shrinking white majority or, in extremis, the purification efforts in the borderlands of Russia and Ukraine. The question of who is entitled to be a citizen, or to have a state in the first place, enmeshes millions into webs of tribunals, census-takers, border-police, fencing and camps that regulate and invigilate the human flow.[6]

Indeed, as this chapter will show, it has been in the efforts to draw lines and borders to separate, to distinguish, that we can see the most acute evidence for the complex interaction between how technologies collapse spatial distancing and how mixing and merging produces efforts to enhance social distance.

What does this mean for global history? We global historians have tended to treat flow as a process that dissolves conceptual divides between majorities and minorities; it's a trait of Marxists looking for signs of international class solidarities, of (neo)liberals who see self-interest and comparative advantage as welding markets across borders, of cosmopolitans committed to ethics of care and curiosity for strangers. Some of us, the confidence in our guidance systems humbled by recent events, oscillate between all three. Either way, there has been a tendency to think of closing spatial distance as bringing in tow intervisibility, recognition and a sense of cultural proximity.[7]

For the first few decades of efforts to transcend the limits of methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism, global historians, myself included, leaned on the vocabularies of integration, with words like 'connection', 'entanglement', 'convergence' and 'exchange' – not to mention 'globalisation'. Of late, they have been under assault, criticised for obscuring place and particularity. The call to 're-scale' our narratives back to the natural units of comradely togetherness in the form of the nation is now in full flight; by restoring place over fluidity, belonging over mobility, the urge to reclaim patriotic narratives appears to correct for everything that de-bordering dismantled. The world financial crisis of 2008 ripped the halo off what was left of globalisation; the

[6] Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 8–9; on human flow, see Ai Weiwei, *Human Flow: Stories from the Global Refugee Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[7] At its most extreme has been the argument that globalisation brings isomorphism and the dawn of 'world society'. See in particular the work of John W. Meyer. Georg Krücken and Gili S. Drori (eds.), *World Society: The Writings of John W. Meyer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Not to be dismissed, Meyer and many colleagues have shown effectively how, starting with education systems from nurseries to universities, nations have come to share the same norms, credentials, curricula and systems of scientific validation.

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nationalist wave of recent years has given way to dysphoric talk of deglobalisation, splinternets and bunkering behind epistemic walls.[8]

Yet these efforts to re-order the world into parts and hierarchies are themselves responses to the effects of how societies have managed distance, how closing spatial divides can yield to new detachments and separations. This chapter is about the ties between global flows and global fencing and the multiple, contradictory meanings of distance. It argues that global integration and ethno-racial categories have gone hand in hand; the first gives new significance to the latter; the latter offer instruments to cope with the former. The chapter points to some underlying currents in global history: the affect of incompleteness in our times, the urge to separate friends from foe, neighbours from strangers, have been recurring features of integration and responses to the collapse of spatial distance.

Until recently, we have not reckoned with how integration produces distance, how erasing spatial distances sparks efforts to separate and conceptual schema to sort – and alienate. We have tended to bracket the separating and distancing reactions to global fusions as spasmodic 'backlashes' of provincial have-nots who have been drained, as one British economist has aptly put it, of a sense of 'belonging'.[9] Instead, we might explore how incompleteness and distancing can be seen as part of integration, not its accidental side-effects.[10]

Confronting the way distance-effects are endogenous to human efforts to bridge physical and social gaps has an important ethical implication for our narratives. To start, we can draw out some continuities from imperial modes of amalgamation to latter-day globalisation to reveal interlocking patterns of integration and hierarchy and to explain why, in particular, imperial modes of sorting and organising what got fused together have such lasting appeal even after empires were on the run. Imperial progeny like 'civilisation', for instance, continue to be coordinates for ranking cultures. In this fashion, the creation of colonial subjects in earlier times and the mass production of stateless people in ours appear not just as side-shows when things go wrong. Rather: interdependence produces the need to stratify and separate. We might even understand the condition of statelessness not just as the by-product of Afghanistan or Venezuela's 'failure', but as consequences of other states' refusal to welcome strangers who have lost – as Hannah Arendt put it – their right to legality. As she noted in the 1967 preface to Part Two of her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, this ultimate form of political distancing, relegating peoples to the condition of

[8] Jeremy Adelman, 'The Patriot Paradox', *Aeon*, 29 April 2021, https://aeon.co/essays/liberal-nationalism-is-back-it-must-start-to-think-globally.

[9] Martin Sandbu, *The Economics of Belonging: A Radical Plan to Win Back the Left Behind and Achieve Prosperity for All* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[10] On self-subversion, see Albert O. Hirschman, *A Propensity to Self-Subversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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living without rights to have rights, began when the expansion of empires in the nineteenth century fused with new racial modes of thinking and distinguishing. Fast forward: refugees exist not just because some states turn citizens into strangers but because other states rely on social categories to legalise their exclusion and turn to the underfunded and much-maligned international community to make up the gap and bear the brunt.[11]

This chapter points to the complex and fraught ways in which global historians have understood distance in two registers at once. It is about how distance is what gets shrunk by growing interdependence between societies; it is also about how interdependence triggers efforts to sort, to rank and to place conceptual distance between interdependents. It shares some thoughts about how we might understand the interplay between distancing and solidarity and the moments that push greater differentiation and those that pull to more solidarity. Not only will this enable us to have richer, more complex accounts of globalisations past; it may help us understand the knife edge we face in the age of climate change, a migrant crisis and ghost ships.

The Demise of Distance?

Distance is intrinsic to global history. It is to the field what water is to fish – at once perspective and subject. Looking at the past beyond the conventions of Eurocentrism, beyond the substrate of methodological nationalism and beyond the endogenous explanations of social life are key features of global history. Going 'beyond' implies distance and perspective, looking at societies from the outside-in or tracing dynamics across their boundaries. We – global historians – need and observe distance simultaneously. The combination of needing and observing distance produces tricks. We reach for an illusion of epistemic virtue of being global and unmoored from bounded attachments of place or communal affinity; we are distant. At the same time, there is an urge to underscore the importance of distance as the subject that needs explaining. One solution, as Sebastian Conrad has noted, is to be more cognisant, more disclosive, of our positionality as historians writing from specific perspectives and locations even as we often slip into Olympian perches gazing down at humanity's exchanges.[12] This can be pushed one step further to note how historical subjects manage distance by comingling necessity with separation, how the distance-collapsing activity of trade or migration also produces the need for

[11] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York; Harcourt Brace, 1968), xvii–xxii; Emma Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[12] Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), in particular 162–84.

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social categories that distinguish between insiders and outsiders, over heres and over theres.

It helps to reckon first with the ways in which global historians thought about distance as something that markets, technologies and environmental pressures surmounted and overcame. Indeed, this was the signature of what distinguished global historians from other branches – because they looked at how societies were bridged, connected and mixed (though not always voluntarily). The theme of bridging and entangling, transcending spatial and social distance, yielded a variety of overarching narratives. The first, and until recently the most common, underscores the importance of integration across locations and reducing the distances between them. It is perhaps best exemplified in Conrad's field-marking *What Is Global History?* Written in what we can now see as the sunset years of post–Cold War globalisation, *What Is Global History?* made the multiple ways and meanings of integration the leitmotif of global history. New technologies, social actors and wider – world-spanning – imaginaries created a growing sense of connection and fusion. To be clear: Conrad was reflecting back what a lot of us were practising in the code-wording of transnational, international and what became baptised in the early 2000s as global history. There were caricatured versions that looked back upon the past as a long voyage of human merging and mixing. An extreme variation of the integration narrative, common to the technological determinism that runs like a current through global history, turns distance crossing into distance collapsing. It is perhaps best captured in Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* of 1962, which underscored the transformative power of media technologies from the rise of moveable type to what he called the electronic age and the global village. Though many subsequent readers (if they read the book at all) tended to interpret *The Gutenberg Galaxy* as a celebration and missed McLuhan's disquiet about homogenisation, repeatability and amnesia (oral cultures, unlike print in his view, were committed to active memorisation), there was no denying the image of world shrinkage. The metaphor would catch on again after 1989, especially with the end of history prophecies and the rise of *homo digitalis*.[13]

In this mode, distance was the global subject precisely because it was the feature of social life that changed as distance became a relic of pre-digital, pre-typographic, pre-steam, pre-compass times. We might quibble over when this process began – was it the Renaissance, the one-world prophecies after 1492 or the global enlightenment of the eighteenth century? – but there is little denying the importance of a cluster of technical changes from the eighteenth century that enabled humans to see distances differently, indeed to see distance as

[13] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

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something that could be mastered and trained. Microscopes, telescopes, photography, telegraphy and electrical clocks triggered human capabilities to observe and watch more carefully across a wider range of distances, from close-ups of the cell to the nebulae in the skies, making visible what the naked eye could not see either because it was too far away or too near or small. By the 1880s, astrophotographers had pushed surveying beyond continental hinterlands on Earth to map the Moon's craters to bring its surface closer. The Director of the Paris Observatory, Ernest Amédée Mouchez, launched the Carte du Ciel project in 1887 as a network of the world's main observatories to identify all the stars. Now the Earth had been shrunk to a glittering speck among specks.[14]

Distance-smashing rhetoric – which had grown across Eurasia in the wake of 1492, upsetting the authority of traditional texts and supercharging a zeal for discovery that went well beyond Europe's Renaissance – acquired new energy with eighteenth-century commercial integration.[15] But it was with industrialisation and a new international division of labour that European champions declared a final triumph over distance. Steam, wiring and government policies facilitated long-distance communications (creating post offices, reducing levies on cross-border flows, abolishing censorship) and slashed the cost and delay of movement. A horse-drawn wagon or coach, crawling at about four miles per hour, would take at least sixteen days to travel from New York City to New Orleans. The arrival of the steam locomotive cut the travel time tenfold. One British observer marvelled in 1839 that the advent of the train would collapse the vastness that separated interior continents from coasts. 'Distances were thus annihilated', he exulted, bringing about a collapse of times and spaces into a common, industrialised, accelerated and shrinking merger.[16] The celebration of the telegraphic cable gave rise to even more exultant prophecies – not least because the effects were more instant; it took much longer for steam engines to revolutionise the political economy of shipping. Once gutta-percha, a Southeast Asian gum capable of insulating cables from corrosion, was discovered, there was a rush to submerge the telegraph; by 1871, a line finally lay across the bed of the Pacific; by 1900, around 350,000 kilograms of underwater cable interlaced the world, so stock and commodity prices, news

[14] David Aubin, 'The Fading Star of the Paris Observatory in the Nineteenth Century: Astronomers' Urban Culture of Circulation and Observation', *Osiris*, 18, 1 (2003), 79–100; David Aubin et al. (eds.), *The Heavens on Earth: Observatories and Astronomy in Nineteenth-Century Science and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Deborah Coen, *Climate in Motion: Science, Empire, and the Problem of Scale* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 171–81.

[15] Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[16] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 34.

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and travel plans could circumnavigate the planet in sixteen minutes to create a single market, especially for business news. Yrjö Kaukiainen is correct that we may read cable boosters too literally; the costs of information flows were falling even before the 'telegraphic revolution'. But the telegraph did mean that, by 1870, news that once took 145 days to go from Bombay to London now took just 3 days. Two avid news readers in London at the time – John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx – would make collapsing distances at the hands of steam and cables the inescapable drivers of capitalism and European civilisation.[17]

For good reason, global historians rely on 'integration' across distances as a keyword. Indeed, global history was imagined as a style of storytelling and analysis fit for the post–Cold War era of globalisation, in which market integration was celebrated, in Margaret Thatcher's immortal words, because 'there is no alternative'. Global historians did not necessarily echo the euphoria or endorse Thatcher's flat-world certainty. But the demise of distance was nonetheless a precept for the field to spotlight the collapse of expanses that could not be explained or understood by local narratives or methodological nationalism.[18] The instant spread of Covid-19 through the sinews of overnight travel – and, indeed, the global spread of cruise-ships for the world's vacationing (and now vaccinated) middle classes to see the 'end of the world' from their gunwales – demanded a style of history that demoted the significance of distance. Among historians, the result was a tendency to see the leitmotif for global history in the enclosure of the world into a single, jet-fuelled survival unit.

Split Worlds

If integration, shrinkage and the demise of distance have been a strong narrative current among global historians, they often obscured a counterpoint – one that has placed the accent on differentiation and separation. While observational and communications technologies enabled people to see more clearly and to convey more instantly across distances, they also re-signified distance and yielded urges to separate, to detach, to mark off and to create new distances, especially in social connectivity. Just as the world's astrophotographers were

[17] Yrjö Kaukiainen, 'Shrinking the World: Improvements in the Speed of Information Transmission, c. 1820–1870', *European Review of Economic History*, 5, 1 (2001), 1–28, here 20; John J. McCusker, 'Demise of Distance: The Business Press and the Origins of the Information Revolution in the Early Modern Atlantic World', *American Historical Review*, 110, 2 (2005), 295–321, here 295–8; Marks, *The Information Nexus*, 127–9.

[18] Perhaps best exemplified in Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), which quite rightly urges a change in some methodological precepts (such as more collaboration across distance and less individualism and Eurocentrism); but the book's timing, coming out on the eve of Brexit, the backlash against migrants, Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro's rise, suggests that we shared some blindspots about that 'global era'.

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cataloguing the Moon's surface and shrinking what we thought about Earth, governments were forging new systems of surveillance and distinction. Legal systems of segregation and categorisation grew up in order to sort what was being mixed.

It was above all at borders that the tensions between a decline in spatial distance and the drive to produce more social distancing was clearest. Visas, passports and border controls all proliferated alongside the intensification of world shipping and migration. Around the time of its first centenary of independence, the United States, the land of immigrants par excellence, was girding to erect a monument to a myth of welcoming: the Statue of Liberty, to pose in the harbour of New York to 'enlighten the world'. If one stopped the story there (as many textbooks do) one would miss a basic counterpoint. Just as the Statue of Liberty was being erected, American legislators were promulgating new systems of exclusion and selection. The most notorious was the 1882 prohibition on Chinese immigrant workers, a pattern of racially informed migration policy to keep out the unwanted which, as Erika Lee has recently explained, was all about creating and enforcing social distances between peoples, a tradition that runs through the history of American migration from colonial days and the foundations of settler capitalism all the way to Trump's infamous border wall.[19]

The United States was simply an extreme case of the more general combination of heightened mobility across distances and the sense of urgency to manage and separate the mixing that ensued, especially in imperial spaces from Canton to Cape Town. In effect: integration in the nineteenth century summoned the need for separation and segregation, perhaps most visibly in the polyglot worlds of New York, Buenos Aires and the Cape Colony. These global hubs were also the site for large-scale 'city-splitting'. In Rio de Janeiro, as Brazilian historians have shown, shantytowns in the centre of the city got pulverised to make way for Parisian boulevards, pushing cortiços northwards or up the moros, giving the poor a distant perch over which they could watch the Haussmannian beautification below and, ultimately, the southward spread of suburb beachfronts along Copacabana and Ipanema. It would fall to the forensic anthropologists of the day, such as Dr Nina Rodrigues with his skull-measuring devices, to sort out the links and lines between races and to create a legal code, inscribed in the language of scientific impartiality, that would uphold what the real estate developers were creating on the ground.[20]

[19] Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

[20] Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, *O Espectáculo das Raças: Cientistas, Instituições e Questão Racial no Brasil, 1870–1930* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993), especially chapter 6, 189–238; Carl H. Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 207–24 on 'city-splitting'.

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The combination of the demise of distance with exclusion and city-splitting was, moreover, made visible. Indeed, the contradictions and complexity of the tricks of distance can be seen – literally – in how they were represented to viewers, as recent work on the history of nineteenth-century photography has shown. The contradiction between proximity and alienation became the staple subjects of new recording devices that intensified the sense of global merger and local segregation. Consider the effect of the camera, the instrument of accelerated global intervisibility from the 1850s onwards. The daguerreotype, for example, was not just the instrument for creating 'realistic' imagery of the Egyptian pyramids; Maxine Du Camp's portrait of the Sphinx buried up to her shoulders in sand in 1849 brought the wonder home to viewers in Paris, first in a gallery and a few years later in an album of travel photos of the world, collapsing the distance between fascinated viewers and grainy viewed – and creating a frenzy for the travel industry. Du Camp's travel companion, on the other hand, was bored to tears by the rubble and the endless sand – and resented Du Camp's immediate celebrity. For those who campaigned against slavery, the possibilities of 'shooting' imagery of enslaved suffering were immediate; they used photographs of human bondage to stir sympathies far away. Slaveowners also saw the potential: they countered with pastoral, feel-good images of plantation domesticity.[21]

The war of images that prevailed over the contested ground of distance – how far apart were free and unfree, migrant and citizen, tourist and spectator? – could also be intimate, unfolding within divided households and split cities. It was in lower Manhattan that the Danish-born reporter Jacob Riis catalogued and photographed the city's tenements structured into Italian, Irish and Jewish ethnic enclaves of squalor. Experimenting with the use of flash technologies to capture the nocturnal city (he started with flashlights and then found a German innovation of mixing magnesium with potassium chlorate an effective way of illuminating while shooting – 'carrying your light where you carry your camera'), Riis shocked the sensibilities of New York's well-heeled, who preferred to keep the urchins of their city out of sight and thus out of mind. Now, togetherness became visible, splashed across the pages of newspapers and magazines, and yielded a rising sense that perhaps the welcoming creed had gone too far – or had at least exaggerated its own triumphs. Riis's images had contradictory effects that I will discuss shortly, of attaching and detaching at the same time. They also informed a model that would be picked up worldwide by socially reforming journalists,

[21] Elizabeth Anne McCauley, 'The Photographic Adventures of Maxine Du Camp' in Davie Olihpant and Thomas Zigal (eds.), *Perspectives on Photography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 19–51; Matthew Fox-Amato, *Exposing Slavery: Photography, Human Bondage, and the Birth of Modern Visual Politics in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 70–101.

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armed with their new, ultra-mobile (for the time) Kodaks, by the end of the 1890s.[22] Perhaps the most infamous was this image of three boys – barefoot – sleeping on Mulberry Street (Figure 9.1).

What disturbed the gentry was not just the indigence. It was the sensation that worlds were merging in their city but classes were diverging; it was that the differences and disparities were brought close, nearby: those hungry, needy kids from Italy or Galicia were underfoot. This was an affront to the prevailing Gilded Age narrative of welcoming at the height of nineteenth-century integration. Closing distance cast light – literally and figuratively – on widening differences that became the obsession of social reformers. The result was a recognition that, for all that steam and cables wired the world into one survival unit, it was a world of strangers. Moreover, it was seen – and hence the importance of lens-based media – as a world divided between the familiar and the strange, the civilised and the barbarian, the haves and the have-nots, sharing one, divided, planet.



Figure 9.1 Jacob Riis, *Children sleeping in Mulberry Street,* New York City, 1890. Public Domain.

[22] Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1890).

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The presence of the stranger provoked a welter of responses, from whitening myths of racial harmony in Brazil to panic about 'Asians' in America or, for that matter, a backlash against Euro-American missionaries in China. The mobility of peoples and the presence of migrants created a – perhaps *the* – signature of modernity: the society of strangers, replete with its champions and critics.[23] Collapsing distances created the need for new tools and concepts to sort, arrange and separate, to govern difference in a new, scientific, key. In this fashion, closing the distance between strangers while keeping them contained and unmixed helped define modernity.

The need to make sense of this duality of integration and estrangement has been stitched into the history of the modern social sciences and is a growing field of global intellectual history. Lately, historians have shown how governing difference required making sense of social distance. This is clear in the way demographers, geographers and ethnographers served in empire-building from the 1870s, often carrying with them skills developed in field work on peasantries and native people at home; as Alexis Dudden has noted of Nitobe Inazo, they laboured to make empires of strangers knowledgeable.[24] One who thought about the implications of enclosing strangers was Georg Simmel. He was working on a general text in 1908 when he felt compelled to reckon with the sociology of space and wrote an excursus about 'the stranger' in history. For him, the stranger is the figure who comes from afar to live in a group – call it 'society'. But the stranger was no wanderer, drifting from place to place; the stranger joined society without being of society and was thus always a potential wanderer. And so, the stranger remains 'distant' – Simmel's word – from the group's 'natives'. For Simmel, what was so potentially unsettling about the stranger was 'the unity of nearness and remoteness', at once intimate and objective, near and far 'at the same time'.[25] It was a prophetic little essay, capturing the zeitgeist of an era in which the promissory Victorian rhetoric about the unstoppable power of technology and self-interest to break down walls seemed to give way to a more apprehensive sense that new walls were rising in their place. A bit like nowadays.

The unity of nearness and remoteness is thus worth considering as a compass for global history. The demise of spatial distance coincided with, and one might say motivated, the creation of social distance. The society of strangers that

[23] See, for instance, James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 18–19.

[24] Alexis Dudden, 'Nitobe Inazo and the Diffusion of a Knowledgeable Empire' in Jeremy Adelman (ed.), *Empire and the Social Sciences: Global Histories of Knowledge* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 111–22. For a fascinating study of anthropology and empire, see also Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[25] George Simmel, 'The Stranger' in Donald Levine (ed.), *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 143–50.

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collapsed distances created the need for mechanisms for sorting and selecting people, drawing on categories of distinction and exclusion to manage the affect of integration, which included unease and panic around the nation threatened or rendered 'incomplete' by the presence of strangers.

A good example of how heightened migration ignited greater urgency to distinguish and to separate was and is the passport and its sibling, the visa. When physical mobility over distances was arduous and expensive, the cost and hassle of moving functioned as natural filters. But as migration soared and elites and governments became more anxious about crowding – and diseased – cities teeming with newcomers, there was heated debate over border controls and identifications. The First World War added military security and suspicion to the mix and stoked an urgency for states to monopolise the documentary control over movement and identification. In 1914, the British government passed the Nationality and Status of Aliens Act, issuing booklets to separate citizens from strangers. Passports became the norm for crossing borders across Europe and fanned out worldwide. When the war finally ended, the new League of Nations sponsored an international conference to begin the process of standardising practices of state vigilance and the creation of national and transnational bureaucracies to surveil and monitor who could leave and who could enter the nation-states. And as passports and eventually visas became documentary evidence that permitted movement across borders – so long as they did not exceed the rising number of 'quotas' that were attached to certain nationalities and races – so too did the need to come up with solutions for those who had no state at all. In effect, no sooner did the passport become a standardised instrument for monitoring the human flow than institutions such as the League of Nations had to create instruments for the new category of the stateless, like Russians expelled during the Revolution and civil war, or Armenians driven from the nationalist crusades in Turkey. One effect was the Nansen Passport, funded, in the absence of a budget for the League Secretariat, by private contributions, direct purchases and stamp sales in Norway and France (Figure 9.2).[26]

What was and remains important to consider is that international mobility and circulation were linked to and inspired national systems of social differentiation. If global integration implied the creation of an enclosed and synchronised sense of capitalist time, it also created new forms of geographical distance marked by borders, barbed wire, walls, visas and elaborate mechanisms for sorting and selecting what and who gets to cross distances. Modern global integration, in effect, did not make distance less relevant. It created a bundle of

[26] John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 133–88.

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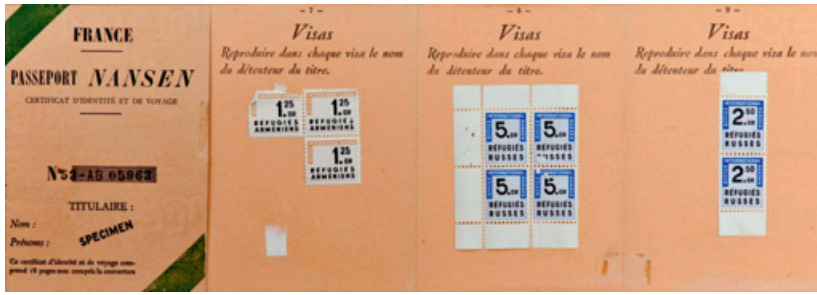


Figure 9.2 Nansen Passport with Stamps, *c.*1930 to 1940. League of Nations Archives Original Source Citation, World Digital Library.

spatial and social sensibilities, at times converging and diverging at others, of simultaneity and estrangement – which has been a source of difficulty for modern social theory and global narratives alike. Integration did not so much do away with distance as re-signify it.

Familiarity

If we can see that convergence gives new meanings to distance and does not just make it some exogenous feature to be overcome by new technologies and institutions, we can start to see that this complexity itself has a history that predates the technological and modernising euphoria of pre-nineteenth-century Victorians, their steam, their cables, their free-market credos and their print technologies. Indeed, there is a genealogy of complex thinking about the problem of distance that we can recover once we set aside some of the modernisationist conventions that have governed world and global history.

The first aspect of the ambiguity of integration is the effect of making strangers at once more familiar and more detached as part of the connecting and integrating process. Historians of the pre-industrial world of exchange and discovery work with a different conceptual vocabulary; instead of one-way integration, they invoke a pluralist world of intervisible parts governed by mores of learning and curiosity, as well as exploitation, that treat distance as that which has to be understood rather than conquered. In a lovely book, *Quelle heure est-il là-bas?*, Serge Gruzinski examines the ways in which exploration and cosmography made distant cities like Istanbul and Mexico City and their lettered elites more aware and curious about each other and created a sense of immediacy and ubiquity, even if a lot of it was illusory or functioned through a series of mirror games that made distant events seem imaginable. At the same time, closing the gap had the effect of running up against inherited and

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incumbent ways of doing things, of making far away people seem strange and exotic, as well as loathsome and scary, 'defamiliarising' them. When Eurasian states came into contact with each other as a result of the ways in which travel, trade and exploration were closing geographies, they created systems of translation and decipherment – inscribed in texts or paintings – to render strangers more comprehensible. When vessels began to connect Mexico City to Manila and thereafter to Istanbul, the systems of representation spanned the globe. They also ensured that the violence and conquests were also, therefore, clashes and exchanges of symbols.[27]

Gruzinski's story is part of a wider effort on the part of especially early modern historians to chart the ways in which societies, as they came into contact with each other, struggled to produce what Sanjay Subrahmanyam described as commensurable values and to create cultural repertoires to manage encounters.

This 'early modern sentiment' might be recovered for global historians and pushed into the making of the modern world to avoid some of the traps laid by proclamations that distance has been demolished, such as one finds in abundance when global history is unreflexively harnessed to the history of globalisation(s). Terms like 'mobility', 'familiarity', 'exchange', 'liminality' and, most of all, 'connection' (as opposed to 'integration') cleared ways to explore routes between and across units without dissolving the sense of – indeed, the discovery of – social distance. For instance, Subrahmanyam's *Three Ways to Be Alien* follows the travels and adventures of three men in the seventeenth century who operated between cultures. The Portuguese took an Indian prince captive. A Venetian merchant winds up in India for six decades. Subrahmanyam's purpose was to break the lock that national and regional (area studies) histories had on familiar bounded subjects and (though he exaggerated somewhat) the tyranny of comparative history, by tracking how his subjects moved across localities.[28] Natalie Zemon Davis's *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* told the tale of Leo Africanus, aka Al-Hasan al-Wazzan. His was a story of 'entangled values', 'double visions' and 'multiple repertoires' that reflected the agonies and artistries of crossing pre-national, mainly devotional, borders. Raised in Fez and winding

[27] Serge Gruzinski, *Quelle heure est-il là-bas? Amérique et Islam à l'orée des temps modernes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2008) [English translation: *What Time Is It There? America and Islam at the Dawn of Modern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010)]; see also Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Earl Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). See also Serge Gruzinski, *Les quatres parties du monde: Histoire d'une mondialisation* (Paris: Éditions de la Martinière, 2006).

[28] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to Be Alien: Travails and Encounters in the Early Modern World* (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

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up in Rome, Al-Hasan would go on to write, translate and broker the epics of African history for European consumption.[29] These are just a few examples of how working across units and exploring connections and entanglements liberated actor-focused narratives from their places, just in time to catch or to echo the cosmopolitan sentiment, multicultural ethos and pluralistic values that (many) institutions of higher education had committed themselves to inculcate. In this way, strangers could become more familiar without being less estranged.

Distance, seen in this way, did not yield to proximity; this was not yet a shrinking world. There was no claim in Subrahmanyam's or Davis's protagonists to moving about in a Braudelian unity in travelling and trailblazing, and certainly nothing bordering on a shared ecumene. Indeed, it is fair to say that connectivity and entanglement tended to reinforce the view of ecumenes as largely locally driven, reproduced and kept apart. In a wonderful recent study of Renaissance cultural diplomacy, Natalie Rothman illuminates how 'encounters' between strangers before they became interdependent created 'trans-imperial' spaces, 'interstices' or 'borderlands'. But while Ottoman and Venetian translators, missionaries, traders and migrants widened the scope for mutual regard, understanding and tolerance, they also serviced empire-building projects of marking territories and drawing boundaries between regimes. The concern remained, resolutely, focused on subjects within domains, not on the systems that crossed them.[30]

Contrast this style of multicultural effort to create more complex world narratives about how actors wrestled with the cultural dimensions of distance with the multicultural styles that have tended to prevail of late. In recent years, globalisation euphoria and the accent on circulation and networks have tended to emphasise the familiarisation that came with contact and interdependence – as if falling short of becoming one-world denoted the incompletion of some liberal, internationalist or capitalist dream. Or for that matter, socialist. Modernists tended to presume that closing the geographic gap meant closing cultural ones, turning strangers into ever more familiar fixtures of life and, eventually, homogenising them. Or, in extremis, exterminating them. This is a signature of Marshall McLuhan's stadial account from oral to print to telegraphic modes of co-existence and merger, which remains a staple for how world-making has been plotted over the centuries. At the time, he was observing the ways in which television was creating a new mode of intervisibility and commonality through communities, networks and values that crossed and erased borders.[31] By the 1970s, 'global thinking' was becoming hot – not

[29] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).
[30] Ella Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).
[31] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

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because so many senses were being aroused by hot media, but because the world was becoming more crowded, unstable, running up against its limits. With it came more and more talk about Coca-Cola-isation, multinationalisation and, after 1989, lots of flat-earth talk about liberalism and networked society (for those who thought globalisation was good) or Americanisation, neoliberalism and hegemony (for the dissenters). If early modern hubs featured mediators and translators of cultural difference, the high-water mark of late-twentieth-century globalisation was dominated by outsourcers and supply-chain builders.[32]

In the years following the end of the Cold War, there was a growing sense of attachment across nations that accompanied the lowered borders between them. Even the diffusion of the term 'global' was part of the lexicon of merging world parts and peoples into one new, scalar mode of living. An ethnography of Wall Street conducted in the late 1990s captured the bravura about a borderless, flowing world seen from its commanding, financialised heights. From such a perch, togetherness meant a simultaneous and synchronised market rhythm, a form of hypercapitalist time in which actors converged on the bankers' schedule in a common urge to be flexible, nimble, mobile, unshackled from the past, 'responsive' (as the terminology of the time liked to say) to the future. Unbound by place or location, money men sought to 'serve the needs of our clients across all geographic borders' (as one 1994 Merrill Lynch report put it). The world's places, like its factories, were becoming ever more liquid.[33]

In an early wave of global history, there was a tendency to presume that scaling-up made distance irrelevant; just-in-time global delivery systems, instantaneous messaging and network society were delivering a sense of collapsed and accelerated synchronicity. One author called for a new field of study and discipline to capture this destiny and called it 'connectography'.[34] His timing was unfortunate, for just as his futurism about 'global civilisation' rolled off the printing presses in 2016, British voters elected to secede from the European Union, Donald Trump was on his way to victory and the confidence in things global dissipated quickly. Distance, as Gruzinski would have noted, may have been bridged but this did not make it any less significant.

[32] The arch example is the notorious Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). Perhaps the best example of this is Quinn Slobodian's intellectual history of neoliberalism to fill the gap opened by the end of European empires as a mechanism for world ordering. Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[33] Karen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 242 and 302.

[34] Parag Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civil* (New York: Random House, 2016).

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Estrangement

Not everyone saw the triumph of flatteners and distance-busters in the same way. For some, physical distance may have collapsed, but social distance had not. If anything, the end of the Cold War had created a semblance of unity and convergence – which overlay chasms. Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* (1994), a survey of the 'short' twentieth century, saw the fall of the Berlin Wall as the signal eclipse of an industrial working class which had anchored socialist alternatives. But if the ideological standoff was over, Hobsbawm worried that the collapsing post-socialist and postcolonial order would trigger more violence between estranged peoples within states. Marxists were not the only ones concerned. Francis Fukuyama declared the end in less materialist terms in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), a book which did not have the same ebullient overtones associated with his 1989 essay, and its nuances, like McLuhan's, got lost in the clichés. Here too there was an ideological patina of unity, but Fukuyama worried that liberalism unchallenged would grow flabby and let more worrying (for him) tribal affinities prosper. Despite their differences, Fukuyama and Hobsbawm were unambiguous about the era-ending moment that dawned with globalisation. Both, however, were wise enough to disparage the rage to forecast and predict the inevitable one-world triumph, and worried that a post-ideological world might be no less violent than its precursor. Looking out at the carnage in the Balkans, Rwanda and elsewhere, they worried about a new type of violence between strangers released by the collapse of imperial and post-imperial states.[35]

Others saw deeper global cleavages revealed and took the paradox of integration one step further, arguing that it was the very forces of integration and globalisation that would produce, not erase, more estrangement and alienation between cultures; the demise of physical distance could intensify social distance. Few works captured this more trenchantly than Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). An epistle aimed at one-worlders whose connectography missed the ways in which interactions between peoples reinforced the sense of estrangement, it had more influence in the domain of public policy in making sense of the 'West's' relationship with Islam. Nowadays, it has been dusted off to explain the abrasion with China and the feud with Putin. Historians like to dismiss *Clash of Civilizations* for essentialising cultures into civilisations, and for good reason. But a second look reveals some important insights that overlap with global historians' interest in the production of 'commensurability' – with travellers, translators and mediators of an earlier era performing the function of making cultures intervisible. For Huntington, the modern era powered

[35] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

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integration by markets and universalising liberal ideas. It also created an ever greater difficulty in understanding social differences and bridging social distances; instead of togetherness around liberal values and market forces, Huntington saw endemic difference and potential violence. Huntington's analysis of distance was more cunning than his critics appreciated. What perpetuated distance between civilisations was precisely the dynamics unleashed by integration, first by European empires, then European cosmopolitanism and cresting with European world governance girded by human rights and private property. So it was that the demise of physical distance sired triumphalist unity rhetoric and aggressive expansion by the victors and set off a 'clash' between the interconnected cultures.[36]

For global historians, the emerging challenge in the post–Cold War era lay in resolving the tension between greater connection and estrangement, in understanding how interdependence could coincide with and even create social divides. Without necessarily taking a Huntingtonian approach, global historians did in fact turn to the paradox of integration and distance, especially in explaining why some societies grew rich and others languished or 'failed'. Market integration, especially after 1820, had spawned greater material divides between people; all the one-world talk was simply papering over the chasms in GDP. Comparative economic historians like myself plunged into the challenge of explaining why some grew rich and some did not. The most famous and debated was Kenneth Pomeranz's account of the 'great divergence': how parts of northwest Europe broke out of their Malthusian trap while parts of riverine China did not. But he was not alone; there were others studying China and Latin America who posed similar questions about how collapsing physical distances and market convergence yielded to divergence.[37] By 2008, the 'what went wrong' story-seeking was a cottage industry to explain global dividing. Needless to say, global economic historians concerned with diverging directions of society did not necessarily subscribe to the cultural fixities of 'us versus them' that marked Huntingtonian analysis. Indeed, most comparative historians tended to explain divides in terms of grubby variables like factor endowments or policy decisions. What is important to note is that the happy

[36] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[37] The list is long: Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); R. Bin Wong and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, *Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Stephen Haber (ed.), *How Latin America Fell Behind: Essays on the Economic Histories of Brazil and Mexico, 1800–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Jeremy Adelman, *Frontier Development: Land, Labour and Capital on the Wheatlands of Argentina and Canada, 1890–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown, 2012).

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convergence narratives that accompanied globalisation did have dissenters for whom distance was not just a physical condition to be overcome with new technologies and institutions.[38]

As long as globalisation appeared to lace the world together with on-demand supply chains, cheap flights and cruises, social divides tended to pale beside the euphoria of those that prospered. Backlashing was left to protestors in Argentina, disgruntled French farmers and ethno-nationalists who seethed about the dismantling of their nations.

This ability to see social distances has, not surprisingly, come out of the shadows in recent years to replace talk of global citizenship and the dividends from liquidating everything on world markets. The fracturing of globalisation is now clearing the way for a different retrospective vision, flagged in the brutal (from the perspective of earlier human rights warriors) headline of a piece in *The Economist* commemorating the 70th anniversary of the UN Convention Against Genocide: 'Never Again, Again, and Again'. Human rights had, as Michael Ignatieff has noted, become the moral global guidance system to accompany market globalisation, lending it legitimacy and creating an infrastructure to manage those whose estrangement turned to abuse. Didier Fassin has called this 'humanitarian government'.[39]

The result has been a sceptical turn among global historians about humanitarian rhetoric and proclamations – and, indeed, all modern universalisms that masquerade as distance-busting credos to match the power of markets and technologies when in fact they often behave in the same ways as the imperial civilising missions they were designed to replace. David Rieff was among the first to call into question the conceits of humanitarianism. In its modern incarnation (there is a dispute over where to start human rights movements), it was connected to the failure of developmentalism and the demise of Third Worldism in the late 1960s. Just as the promise of closing the gap between the haves and the have-nots faded, according to Rieff, humanitarians offered new hope and championed new treaties and international laws. 'Those the gods wish to destroy', Rieff noted acidly, 'they first allow to set international norms.' Writing in the aftermath of the bloodbaths of Srebrenica (where Rieff was a reporter) and Rwanda, he reminded readers that 'no century had better norms and worse realities'.[40]

[38] Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*; Wong and Rosenthal, *Before and Beyond Divergence.*

[39] 'Never again, again, and again', *The Economist*, 8 December 2018, www.economist.com/international/2018/12/08/can-the-world-stop-genocide; Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[40] David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 56 and 71.

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The urge to capture the history of how global ideas and norms created the illusion of breaking down distances has transformed not just the history of humanitarianism and the governance of and for strangers, but global intellectual history tout court. Leading the way has been Samuel Moyn. In the wake of the declaration of war against Iraq in 2003, Moyn turned his sights to the history of human rights as a movement to replace the disenchantment with self-determination and decolonisation. In his view and others', a short but intense arc of events – from the war in Biafra to Prague Spring and the Helsinki Accords, to atrocities in Argentina and Cambodia – stripped nation-states of their halo as rights makers and saw them as rights takers. Movements mobilised lawyers and activists to appeal to a higher normative order, what Moyn has called the last utopia.[41] It took time for this post-national vision of a global world of networked activists working in the service of a post-national idyll to take shape. In 2003, Aryeh Neier, the founder of Human Rights Watch and later head of the Open Society Foundations, reflected back on four decades of 'struggle for rights'. He noted how the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe had been resisted by the Ford administration in 1975, even as it was going to subject the Soviet bloc to the scrutiny of human rights activists. It was only much later, in the 1990s, that the flowering of the treaty's significance for the new human rights regime became clear. He was shocked 'to discover years later that the CSCE [Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe] had yielded benefits beyond our wildest imagination'.[42] To Moyn, this was the kind of self-serving retrospective that celebrated the angels of history while obscuring the effects on strangers they thought they were rescuing. Ever since, the history of world 'humanitarian government' has been seen as an effort doomed to recycle past illusions about helping strangers while separating and dividing them and creating a new global hierarchy.[43]

Strange Interdependence

Distance, as should be clear, is not just tricky; it plays tricks. Technologies and organisations that claim to close gaps often create new ones that are not always seen as the result of efforts to connect and merge. At heart, this chapter has argued, growing interdependence has produced deeply mixed responses of

[41] Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[42] Arieh Neier, *Taking Liberties: Four Decades in the Struggle for Rights* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 159.

[43] Heather Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); and for a defence of human rights as a corrective to market integration, see Kathryn Sikkink, *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

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integration and estrangement, new models of belonging together to some new, often abstract idea of a world community, while making the divides between peoples at home and far away not just deeper, but more visible.

Earlier in this chapter I detoured to earlier modern global historians in part because they worked with a vocabulary that was more accommodating of the greys and ambiguities of what it meant to close the distances between peoples. One reason is because early modern thinkers in Mexico City, Delhi or Paris were not yet tethered to the one-world, modernising narratives that would govern capitalist storytelling habits and the technologies they wielded from the nineteenth century onwards.

Let me conclude by recovering the idea that we need more complex approaches to the distance question that accommodate the ambiguities and contradictions produced by integration and closure. Before the triumph of world capitalism, before the pulverising effects of free trade and steam technologies (what Marx and Engels would call 'heavy artillery'), this was easier to appreciate. In *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, Carlo Ginzburg has reminded us of a moral experiment conducted by the eighteenth-century *philosophe*, Denis Diderot. Do we cease to feel compassion if a person in distress is far away; does distance 'produce the effect on us that the lack of sight produces on the blind?' Diderot asked. Presaging our current debates about drone bombings and missiles, Diderot speculated that many people would find it easier to kill a man at a distance if he 'appeared no larger than a swallow'. Distance, the appearance of things being smaller, created an illusion, a kind of trap. The eighteenth-century world had sewn its parts together through exchange and scientific curiosity and made its parts more visible to each other – more visible and yet at the same time diminished by the tricks of distance. At its extreme, it made foreigners more familiar but less human.[44]

The concern about the tricks of distance was not just ideational. Indeed, two prophets of commercial capitalism, Adam Smith and David Hume, worried about the moral consequences of closing the material gaps between strangers. It obsessed them – and set off, as Luc Boltanski has noted, an urge to 'symmetrise' the spectator and the far-away spectacle, including the spectacle of suffering strangers.[45] For Hume, commercial nations were 'both the happiest and most virtuous'. In an essay he wrote in 1752, and which deeply influenced Smith's thinking about trade, Hume explained that 'industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and, what are

[44] Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes*, 162–70.

[45] Silvia Sebastiani, 'What Constituted Historical Evidence of the New World? Closeness and Distance in William Robertson and Francisco Javier Clavijero', *Modern Intellectual History*, 11, 3 (2014), 677–95; Luc Boltanski, *La souffrance à distance: Morale humanitaire, médias et politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 90–4.

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more commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages'. It was from trade among strangers and the spread of consumption that people learned the habit of 'conversing together'. Interdependence exposes peoples of the world to different goods, tastes and desires. It 'rouses men from their indolence; and presenting the gayer and more opulent part of the nation with objects of luxury, which they never before dreamed of, raises in them a desire of a more splendid way of life than what their ancestors enjoyed'.[46] Being exposed to luxuries, goods and services beyond one's reach, especially when they came from exotic places, motivated peoples' pursuits, civilised them and made them more other-regarding. Smith was more troubled; he doubted whether sympathy might march in lockstep with self-interest. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) the Scottish moral philosopher wondered if a gentleman would worry more about a pain in his finger than the fate of thousands of Chinese people swallowed up by an earthquake.[47] Here were two societies connected to each other by trade and science yet separated by sentiment. Did distance diminish the capacity to identify with another's pain despite mutual interests? Even more, did the commercial contact that brought the two peoples together create the illusion of a sympathy that did not keep pace?

More than two centuries later, the same tension, the same trickery, is at work. Yes, there were voices, even at the dawn of modern globalisation, that worried that markets and cameras had created an illusion of closure. In an important work on the history of capitalist thinking, Albert O. Hirschman excavated a different story about the history of self-interest and world-making. His *Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (1977) was an effort to see markets in less triumphal ways, more open to moral considerations at their root, and to draw the reader's attention to the limits of self-interest in connecting strangers. In the same year, Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) meditated on the complex tricks of the camera. She questioned the celebration of 'photographic objectivity' and the heroic photographer as the impartial witness to history that brought distant events home and closed the gap between strangers; most especially, she questioned the very notion that the image of others' suffering might make the viewer feel more attachment and empathy. In fact, a world saturated with

[46] 'Of Refinement in the Arts', quoted in Margaret Schabas and Carl Wennerlind, *A Philosopher's Economist: Hume and the Rise of Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 114 and 127.

[47] 'If he [this imagined man of humanity] was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them [the suffering Chinese], he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.' Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael (= The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, vol. 1) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 233.

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images of strangers in distress was as likely to foster detachment as attachment. The lens, now mounted on our phones, the latter-day instrument most responsible for closing the distance between strangers, was equally an instrument for making those distances all the more intractable.

Sontag and Hirschman picked up where the eighteenth-century *penseurs* left off and opened trails for us to examine more ambiguous and contradictory effects of proximity, to see that closure creates new social divides. The sooner we can dispense with narratives that imply a singular logic or an inevitable shift from a world of villages to the global village – whether through the 'fix' of capital or the finesse of new media, whether in a mood of dysphoria or euphoria – the better.

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